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## THE ETHICS OF PAUL

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In a previous article<sup>1</sup> I maintained that, strictly speaking, there was no ethics of Jesus; that, while he uttered and exemplified ethical principles in abundance, Jesus did not set forth a system of ethics nor manifest a dominant ethical motive. Jesus was neither theologian, nor ethicist; he was, rather, pre-eminently religious. Were the word in good use, we should call him a religionist.

When Jesus and Paul are brought into comparison, strong contrasts appear. Paul is more ethical than Jesus but less religious (referring now to religion, apart from ethics, in its esoteric, mystic sense). It is strange that Paul should ever have been thought to be strikingly unlike James, as though there were violent antagonism between the "faith" of Paul and the "works" of James. In his insistence upon deeds and the ethical expression of life Paul far more closely resembles James than he does Jesus. In the spirit and almost in the language of James (James 1:19-25) Paul lays stress on conduct; "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified" (Rom. 2:13).

Paul writes no letter, now preserved to us, however personal or however theological it may be, without setting forth in the concluding portion some practical rules of conduct, a brief ethical homily. The issue of his advice and appeal seems always to be ethical. In his addresses and sermons, as reported in the Book of Acts, the ethical stress is less prominent than in the epistles which have come from Paul's own hand. These epistles show Paul as a theologian primarily, then an ethicist prominently, and a religionist in a smaller degree. The two epistles to the Corinthians, although shot through with the religious impulse, are nevertheless distinctively ethical. The Epistle to the Romans, the greatest theological essay extant from the apostle's pen, devotes nearly a quarter<sup>2</sup> of its contents to a practical, ethical

<sup>1</sup> "The Ethical Principles of Jesus," *Biblical World*, July, 1909, pp. 26-32.

<sup>2</sup> I am not now including the 16th chapter in the last quarter of the Epistle to the Romans.

application and appeal. And as Paul advances in age and experience he becomes even more ethical in matter, in form, and in atmosphere. The epistles of the imprisonment, while still chiefly theological in their lofty Christology, descend to the purely ethical level of detailing duties pertaining to husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves; and the pastoral group of epistles, if genuinely Pauline, evince an increase of ethical characteristics.

It is the religious content of the message of Jesus which grips men, stirs them, fires their enthusiasm, and calls forth their worship and devotion. One can scarcely become enthusiastic over Paul's theological disquisitions, however much one may admire the dialectic skill, the missionary zeal, and the personal self-sacrifice of the great apostle. A controversialist could take up cudgels against Paul; there is ground for argument on nearly all of his theological premises: but no one would think of arguing with Jesus; his utterances, out of the clear atmosphere of religious certitude, ring full and true in every religious soul. His irenic tones are the notes of the Prince of Peace. His words, almost axiomatic, push by the critical, judicial, disquisitional faculties and penetrate to the better, vital, living, loving self; they arouse, they inspire, they appear imitable; they *are* imitated, not because the same thing can be done now, but because a thing of the same kind is now required; and the religious genus is self-fertilizing and self-perpetuating. The ethics of Paul, like the theology of Paul, issues rather from the logical than from the religious nature. More formally expressed in phrase than is the ethics of Jesus, Paul's ethical appeals do not fire and inflame the reader to imitate and do. The requirements are sane and sound; judgment can weigh them calmly and judgment approves them; yet the reader can more readily turn away from Paul's ethical requirements and leave them unperformed than he can from the ethical principles of Jesus, though less formally expressed and less capable of imitation. The principles of Jesus are infectious; they carry the contagion of imitation and repetition, even in their impossibilities; while Paul's rules of conduct, unobjectionable from the judicial and logical point of view, do less in awakening desire to perform and less in overcoming volitional inertia.

We may sum up a comparison of Jesus and Paul by saying that,

in the order of emphasis, Jesus brought in the first place the message of religion, in the second place the message of ethics, and that he offered no theology to his followers, while Paul undertook pre-eminently to set forth a theology, in the second place to establish a system of ethics, and in the third place he himself felt, and imparted to others, the glow of religious feeling.

Paul does not derive his ethical code from the teaching of Jesus, by direct citation and reference, as much as one would naturally suppose. Once in the Book of Acts he is represented as justifying his own self-sacrificing conduct among the Ephesians, whose elders had come down to Miletus to bid him farewell, and his exhortation to them to minister unto others, by a direct reference to the words of Jesus, for Paul is reported as saying: "In all things I gave you an example, that so laboring ye ought to help the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 21:35). Such a citation of the words of Jesus, however, is exceptional. "The mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:5) is set forth as an ideal; that Christ "lives in" one (Gal. 2:20) and that a life may be lived "in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20) are statements enforcing ethical considerations; likewise one may "put on" Christ (Rom. 13:14) and may "learn" Christ (Eph. 4:20), so as to exemplify ethical ideals, the opposite of which is described in the phrase to "walk as the Gentiles," "in the vanity of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart, who being past feeling gave themselves up to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness" (Eph. 4:17-19).

This backward reference to Jesus in the ethics of Paul is not due to the ethics of Jesus, nor even to the ethical principles of Jesus, but seemed necessary to Paul because of what Paul understood Jesus to be in a theological sense. As Paul does not imitate, or repeat, the ethics of Jesus, nor deduce his ethics from the teaching of Jesus, we must recognize the ethics of Paul, while Christian, yet distinctively Pauline. In his ethical rules Paul is bringing his interpretation of the life of Jesus into contact with the lives of the disciples; but it is the theological mode of procedure, the derivative deductions of an

independent ethicist. Paul does not say: "Do this, because Jesus did it"; nor, "Do this, because Jesus commanded it"; but, rather, if we may put words into his mouth, Paul taught men the rules of life with this injunction: "Do this, because it accords with the true significance of the life of Jesus," or, to employ a better theological phraseology, we may imagine Paul would say, "Do this, because it harmonizes with the soteriological intent of the mission of Jesus."

When Paul had himself accepted Jesus, out of his remarkable conversion from a persecutor to an ardent friend and supporter of the Christian church, Paul did the more remarkable thing of reconstructing, almost from the ground up, his whole ethical system. Previously a Jew of the strictest sort and priding himself on the punctilious observance of all Pharisaic requirements in the interpretation and fulfilment of the law (Gal. 1:13, 14; Phil. 3:3-6), yet he repudiated circumcision and all other works of the law as of no ethical value (Gal 5:2-6; 2:3) and thoroughly purged himself of the acrid hatred and contempt for those whom he previously had regarded as religiously unclean and ethically wrong, and boldly took Peter, the representative of the old mother church and of the apostolic group, to task for yielding to the former prejudices and withdrawing from those, who, once Gentiles and despised, at length had entered into the fellowship of Christians (Gal. 2:12). While thus abandoning the former ethical rules, and ridding himself of their restraints, Paul still held to the great moral law, spoken through Moses. He repeatedly re-enforced the Ten Commandments (Rom. 13:9).

An examination of the ethical teaching of Paul shows that his injunctions and appeals are largely of a social character. He is not a socialist, nor a sociologist, but he may be termed a social ethicist. According to his instruction, theology, when applied to life, becomes largely regulative of the interstices between individuals, that is, regulative of social relations. For example, "the fruits of the Spirit" are evinced chiefly in social virtues, and "the works of the flesh," performed by the sinner, require also in nearly every instance one with whom, or against whom, the sinner may sin. To the Corinthians, of whose correspondence with Paul, a portion of which is lost, we have nevertheless a larger amount preserved than of the correspondence with any other church, or person, Paul was almost wholly

didactically ethical; to them he wrote of personal ethics, family ethics, church ethics, and social ethics. The doctrine of the resurrection is the most prominent theological subject discussed, and even this subject is set forth more in its ethical and practical, than its theological, aspects.

In the casual correspondence, in which Paul's opinions and convictions are expressed, we have no formal system of ethics set forth. More nearly does the author of these letters formulate a system of theology, complete in logical expression, though not comprehensive and inclusive of all doctrinal themes. The ethics, however, though without reduction to a system, is stated topically, or in groups. After the doctrinal discussion, found in almost every epistle as the main burden of the epistle's message, Paul applies the lesson, or gives in many details new lessons, upon several subjects, which usually are grouped together, and are capable of distinct paragraphing under separate titles, or sub-heads.

The general content of Paul's ethics we may gather from his epistles<sup>3</sup> and group under four heads: (1) the ethical ideal; (2) duties toward self; (3) social duties; and (4) duties toward God. These groups may be made the basis of further and fuller investigation of the ethical obligations which Paul inculcates.

#### THE ETHICAL IDEAL

Paul's ethical ideal is variously described, or alluded to.

1. Sometimes he holds up for imitation the example of others, who worthily exemplify the cardinal Christian virtues. In this manner he commends the Thessalonians, because they "became imitators in suffering of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus: for ye also suffered the same things of your own countrymen, even as they did of the Jews" (I Thess. 2:14). Frequently he calls upon others to imitate himself, as he also imitates Christ (I Cor. 11:1; 4:16; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; I Thess. 1:6, etc.).

2. Sometimes social service appears as the end in view (Rom 14:19, 21; Phil. 2:14-16; Eph. 4:13).

3. "To please God" is frequently stated as both the motive and the goal of conduct (I Thess. 2:4; 4:1; Gal. 1:10; II Cor. 5:9; Rom. 12:1, 2; Col. 1:10; 3:20, 22; Eph. 6:1, 5).

<sup>3</sup> I am making now but one reference to the Pastoral Epistles.

4. To have fellowship with Christ at other times appears as the ideal (I Cor. 1:11-16; Rom. 13:14; Col. 2:6; Phil. 2:1-11).

#### DUTIES TOWARD SELF

While largely inculcating social virtues, yet Paul does not fail to teach and exhort the individual to cultivate personal virtues for his own personal welfare.

1. Personal purity is insisted upon plainly and repeatedly (I Thess. 4:3-7; I Cor. 6:12-20; 10:8).

2. Sobriety and orderliness belong to the individual, as well as to society (Eph. 5:18; I Thess. 4:11).

3. Humility is extolled as often as any one single virtue, often by way of contrast with its opposite, "boasting" or being "puffed up" (I Thess. 2:6; Gal. 5:26; 6:14; I Cor. 1:27, 29; 3:21; 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2, 6).

4. Tenderness and gentleness, hardly expected from the brusque, logical writer who evinces at times a fiery impetuosity, are nevertheless praised and inculcated (Eph. 4:25-32; Col. 3:8-14; I Thess. 2:7).

5. The commonly required virtue of honest speech is not lightly esteemed by Paul (Eph. 4:15, 25 ff.; Col. 3:8 ff.).

6. Self-control Paul struggles for for himself (I Cor. 9:25-27).

7. Paul could almost pen the Latin motto, which many a school-boy has written on the flyleaf of his textbook, *Labor omnia vincit*. He requires activity; he holds that those who will not work should not eat, and he believes that an indomitable will, busy with useful enterprises, can overcome outward circumstances, however difficult (I Thess. 4:11; II Thess. 3:8, 10; II Cor. 4:7-12, 16-18; 6:4-10; 12:7-10).

8. Paul also held that one's own independent labor should preserve one's self-respect and defend one from mis-judgment (I Thess. 2:9; I Cor. 9:6-23), while at the same time one must feel the obligation of serving and helping others (I Cor. 8:13; 10:28-33; Rom. 14:1-23).

#### SOCIAL DUTIES

The conditions prevalent in the society with which Paul was acquainted and in daily contact determined the character of the

obligations which he laid upon the converts to Christianity, whom he warned and instructed. As all of his letters were written on special occasions, so all of his ethical appeals have reference to specific and not theoretical duties. Not a few of the subjects of which he treats were called forth by questions propounded by his readers, either through letters or by representatives and messengers.

1. The subject of marriage is discussed in answer to a question from the Corinthians (I Cor. 7:1). In the discussion some have supposed that they found evidence that the apostle himself was never married (I Cor. 7:7, 8); and yet the allusion to casting a vote (Acts 26:10) when Christians, who had been persecuted were put to death, implies that Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, which alone could decree such a fate, and that therefore Paul at that time was a married man, as only married men, whose experience was deemed sufficient for the duties of the office, were eligible to membership. If this was the case and Paul had been married, then the language of I Cor. 7:8 would imply that Paul was at the time of writing a widower, "But I say to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them to remain even as I," and I Cor. 9:5 would be understood in the same manner, "Have we no right to lead about a wife that is a believer, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas?"

But whatever his own domestic condition may have been, Paul seemed, for the sake of Christian service, to prefer celibacy; he appeared to choose between evils. "It is better," he says, "to marry than to burn"—a not very cordial indorsement of the married state (I Cor. 7:9); and he distinctly declares that it is better not to marry at all (I Cor. 7:1, 26, 29-40), his chief reasons being that the time is "short" and the unmarried can better give themselves, undiverted, to the affairs of the Lord. From such considerations it is obvious that at the time of writing Paul was under the domination of a belief in the speedy presence of the Lord, and, therefore, had less concern for relations and ties which would make this life of supreme importance.

If, however, marriage took place, then Paul's counsel is explicit and practical. Each belongs to the other in mutual relations and mutual bonds (I Cor. 7:3-5). He counsels against separation, even in the case which must have seemed to him the extreme of provoca-



tion, when one was an "unbeliever," provided that the husband and wife can live together in "peace" (I Cor. 7:10-16). Though Paul regards the woman as subordinate to the man, inasmuch as he is "the image and glory of God" while she is "the glory of the man" (I Cor. 11:7-10), yet both the man and the woman depend upon each other and need each the other (I Cor. 7:11, 12). When he exhorts wives to be subject to their husbands, as unto Christ (Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18), straightway he bids husbands to love their wives, even as Christ loved the church, an obligation quite as ethically important as for the wife to obey (Eph. 5:25-33; Col. 3:19).

2. According to Paul parents and children have mutual obligations, children to obey and honor their parents, and parents not to provoke their children, but to nurture them and admonish them (Eph. 6:1, 2; Col. 3:20, 21).

3. Paul did not undertake to emancipate the slaves and abolish slavery. Paul even returned a runaway slave to his master. But he insisted that masters and slaves should treat each other fairly, with the recognition that God was over both and that each could serve God well by discharging well his obligations in this relationship of man to man; that was the spirit of Christian fellowship. Slaves should give obedience unto their masters as unto Christ, and masters, forbearing threatening and severity, must render unto their slaves that which is just and impartial (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-25; 4:1).

As slavery was the form in which labor existed in Paul's day, doubtless in these injunctions we come as nearly as we can in Paul's epistles to explicit statements respecting the mutual obligations of employer and employee, and the great social duties which modern industrial conditions render so prominent. In refusing to liberate the runaway slave, determining rather to return him to his lawful owner, according to the laws of the times, Paul declined to sanction social reforms by the way of revolution, but when he bade Philemon to regard the returned Onesimus as "a brother beloved" and treat him accordingly, Paul is placing his reliance for reform upon the slower but surer method of evolution, attended by its natural processes of assimilation and development (Philemon 10-20).

4. Neighborliness is a frequent duty in the mind of Paul. It is surprising that in his reference to neighbors and his insistence that love to one's neighbors should prevail, Paul does not mention the

second great commandment which Jesus gave; but rather Paul bases his appeal for neighborly love upon the essentially social nature of the Ten Commandments the sum of which consists in loving one's neighbor (Rom. 13:8-10, particularly the tenth verse, "If there be any other commandment, it is summed up in this word, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: love therefore is the fulfilment of the law"; Gal. 5:14, "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"). The parable of the Good Samaritan is not mentioned, and the citation of this commandment seems to hark back to the Levitical code (Lev. 19:18): "Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people; but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am Jehovah."

Paul inculcates sound altruism, when he bids his readers to seek not their own, but their neighbors' good (I Cor. 10:24), and urges them to please their neighbors "for that which is good unto edifying" (Rom. 15:1, 2). A social solidarity with one's neighbor seems to be recognized, as the basis of appeal for speaking the truth to one's neighbor, "for ye are members one with another" (Eph. 4:25).

5. The church is a constant object of solicitude and attention with the apostle, and many duties toward the church and between church members are mentioned. Church members should live at peace with each other (I Thess. 5:13; II Cor. 13:11); they should edify each other (I Thess. 5:11; I Cor. 14:26), particularly assisting and bearing with the weak (I Thess. 5:14; II Thess. 2:15; Gal. 6:1, 2); they should settle differences between Christians within the precincts of the church itself (I Cor. 6:1 ff.); they should preserve decorum in the public assemblies (I Cor. 14:40); they should support those who teach (Gal. 6:6); they should be subject one to another (I Cor. 16:15, 16); and they are frequently exhorted to aid the poor by taking regularly an offering of money (I Cor. 16:1 ff.; II Cor. 8:1-15; 9:1 ff.; Rom. 15:26-28; cf. Phil. 4:18).

6. As for duties to the state, the obligations of citizenship and of patriotism are summed up in three comprehensive injunctions. Christians are under obligations to give respect to the civil government (Rom. 13:1-7), to pay taxes (Rom. 13:6, 7), and to pray "for kings and all that are in high places" (I Tim. 2:10 ff.).

7. In relation to mankind and the world at large, the great, com-

elling motive, and the supreme obligation, is love. Christians are to love their fellow-men and abound in love for them, rendering good for evil, and exercising generosity, charity, and patience toward all (Rom. 12:9-21; I Cor., chap. 13; I Cor. 4:6-10); and it is the duty of Christians to hold forth the word of life and preach the gospel in "parts beyond" (Phil. 2:15, 16; II Cor. 10:16; Rom. 15:18-20). This missionary obligation is reinforced by the example of the apostle.

#### DUTIES TOWARD GOD

Of duties toward God no formal acts are specified. Paul lays down no laws of sacrifice, ceremony, and ritual. From all of these he has reacted in the turn of his life from Judaism to Christianity. With him the godly life is its own vindication; that is the life given in service to one's fellows, and is justified in the discharge of duties to men as the fulfilment of obligations to God (Rom. 12:3-4). Often Paul speaks of "pleasing God" (I Thess. 2:4; 4:1; Gal. 1:10; II Cor. 5:9; Rom. 12:1, 2; Col. 1:10; 3:20, 22; Eph. 6:1, 5) and of becoming worthy of the kingdom of God, and of not murmuring against God (I Thess. 2:4; 4:1; II Thess. 1:5; I Cor. 10:10); but these are the obligations of motive and "spirit," rather than of action and conduct.

The great apostle did not repeat the deeds of Jesus, and scarcely revived the words and the example of Jesus; but he appears to have endeavored to gather the intent of Jesus and the interpretation of the life of Jesus in what may be called "the spirit" of Jesus and then to have undertaken the more difficult task of translating that spirit into the deeds and the duties of the day, fitted to time and place. The Pauline ethics is Christian ethics in so far as it has succeeded in incorporating in action the inner principles, rather than the external acts, of Jesus.

Out of the teaching of Paul it would appear that the ethics of the Christian needs to be in a constant process of reconstruction according to changing circumstances and environment; and that the modern Christian disciple need not attempt to walk precisely in the steps of Jesus nor do exactly as Jesus did, nor follow in all literalness apostolic precedent in order to be apostolic.